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# Global Justice Blog

Global Justice Academy and Global Development Academy, University of Edinburgh

## Shaking Hands in Dayton and Singapore: Symbolic Representations of Peace Processes

Posted on **June 13, 2018** by **Harriet Cornell**

In this post, PSRP researcher Laura Wise reflects on symbolic representations of handshake moments at high-level peace summits, and what we miss when we consistently focus on comprehensive peace agreements. This is a longer version of remarks delivered at the **IICR 2nd Annual Conference 'Networked Cultures: Translations, Symbols, and Legacies'**, as part of a session convened by the IICR Cultures of Peace and Violence Network. PSRP and the Global Justice Academy are proud members of this interdisciplinary network that enables discussions on how symbolic representations constrain or facilitate cultures of peace and violence, and we look forward to participating in future events.



- Kim and Trump shaking hands on the red carpet during the DPRK-USA Singapore Summit on 12 June 2018

Handshake moments are currently a hot topic, as journalists rush to interpret the symbolism of the Singapore Summit between North Korea and the United States. From the [diplomatic menu](#)

to the moment the leaders of each country make physical **contact**, no aspects of negotiation process are above being scrutinized for what they can tell us about the potential for achieving peace. Meanwhile, participants and commentators often hail the agreements themselves **as historic and comprehensive** even before crucial details of a done deal are released to the public, with parties keen to credit themselves as having achieved what no other figure has managed to do thus far.

Over twenty years ago, another high-level summit was capturing the world's attention, as leaders from the former Yugoslavia and other interested parties gathered at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, to negotiate yet another comprehensive peace plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After twenty-one days of intensive talks, parties finally reached agreement on the **General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina**, which Presidents Alija Izetbegovic (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Slobodan Milosevic (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and Franjo Tudjman (Croatia) initialled on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995. This agreement, more commonly known as the Dayton agreement, is regularly noted as ending the three-year conflict that **killed over 95,000 people** and **displaced over 2 million people from their homes**.



- President Slobodan Milosevic, President Alija Izetbegovic and President Franjo Tudjman (L-R) initial the General Framework for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina in Dayton, Ohio, 21st November 1995. Photo credit: U.S. Air Force/Staff Sgt. Brian Schlumbohm

Focusing on the importance of such high-level meetings, and substantive, comprehensive peace agreements, however, can obscure the complex and incremental trajectory of formal processes to resolve violent conflicts. Delving into the **PA-X Peace Agreements Database** suggests that what is often striking about our obsession with handshake moments is not what they tell us about the pursuit of peace, but what is often missing from these pictures.

A key takeaway from PA-X is that previous academic and practitioner focus on comprehensive agreements does not reflect the practice of peace processes from 1990-2016. Of the 1,518 peace agreements on the database, only 95 are comprehensive agreements in which parties outline agreement on substantive issues and include details of attempts to resolve the conflict. In contrast, 467 peace agreements in the same period were pre-negotiation deals that aim to

get parties to the negotiating table, which can happen at any time in a peace process, even after parties have reached a comprehensive agreement.

The Bosnian peace process is emblematic of this incremental progress, which also challenges the often-assumed linear trajectory of reaching pre-negotiation, ceasefire, comprehensive, and implementation agreements. Prior to reaching the Dayton agreement in November 1995, various parties had signed 112 peace agreements relating to conflicts in Bosnia, including three comprehensive peace plans. Most of these agreements were attempts to broker ceasefires, or bring parties back to the negotiating table, particularly after belligerents reneged on more substantive peace plans. By focusing on the handshake moment at Dayton, we overlook not only the huge number of steps that it took to get to that point in the peace process, but also the agreements that were yet to be reached.

Another aspect of peace processes that focusing on high-level talks to reach a central deal excludes is the piecemeal nature of processes across conflicts, often between belligerents whose inclusion at the main table would grant a very different optic. Whilst scholars, practitioners, and journalists are increasingly reflecting on the role of local agreements in contemporary conflicts such as [Syria](#) and [Libya](#), PA-X shows that such deals have been forged since the 1990s, to end violence or enable humanitarian access to limited territories within a wider conflict zone.

In Bosnia, military commanders and community representatives brokered some of these earlier agreements to deal with immediate concerns in places such as [Prozor](#) and [Gorazde](#), and conducted talks in locations such as front rooms in [Ahmici](#) and hotels in Novi Travnik,<sup>[i]</sup> rather than conference halls in London or Geneva. Often missing from accounts of peace processes that jump between international summits, these local deals tell a different story about who brokers peace, where these discussions take place, and what is happening beyond attempts to map out a central agreement for the whole country.

The pageantry and pomp of reaching high-level peace agreements between famous faces will probably always capture our attention far more than the grim realities of brokering temporary reprieves for communities trapped in conflict-affected enclaves. Nevertheless, once the excitement around handshake moments fades, and presidents have patted themselves on the back, it is worth reflecting on the extraordinary amount of work that it takes to reach these moments, and how far is still to go.

Photo credit: [Dan Scavino Jr.](#)

Further reading: [Wise, L. \(2017\). Bosnia-Herzegovina Case Study \(PSRP Briefing Paper No. 17\). Edinburgh: Global Justice Academy, University of Edinburgh.](#)

<sup>[i]</sup> Stewart, B. *Broken Lives*. (1994). London: Harper Collins Publishers, 77-78.

[\[http://www.globaljusticeblog.ed.ac.uk/2018/06/13/dayton-and-singapore/\]](http://www.globaljusticeblog.ed.ac.uk/2018/06/13/dayton-and-singapore/) .



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